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VII.

RECENT HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY.

Von Holst's Constitutional History of the United States.

Adams's Life of Albert Gallatin.

Writings of Albert Gallatin.

Shea's Life and Epoch of Hamilton.

Cullum's Campaigns and Engineers of the War of 1812.

To the general reader, American history is not interesting. It lacks picturesqueness. With the exception of a few striking episodes, it affords scarcely anything of what is called the romance of history. It contains no material for the historical novel, needing only the touch of creative imagination in the grouping and arranging; and that which attracts the general reader in history is essentially the same that fascinates him in fiction. The bareness of our annals in incident and character that have the attraction of romance is due to many circumstances, but chiefly to the fact that from the first we have had, in form and substance, a free government. The history of England has lost much of its attractiveness since her constitutional government has become fully established. People take a deep interest in the fortunes of persons rather than states, and sympathize with the experiences of heroes, not administrations. When countries are ruled by individuals, the rulers become exalted into a species of demigod, and are the objects of devotion. They are the state, and their fortunes awaken sympathies as deep and intense as the deeds and sufferings of the lofty beings of myth and romance. Their will and their personality operate in public affairs, and give to the events of history a vividness and vitality that appeal to the sentiments and feelings. Their rise or fall is momentous, their triumph or humiliation of absorbing importance; their followers do deeds of daring and suffer the pangs of martyrdom in their service or in their cause, and the vicissitudes of a nation's life are filled with thrilling incidents of personal action or endurance, like those which the imagination delights to picture.

But we have had no despots, no beneficent fathers of the people, no princes or pretenders, and our history is devoid of the stirring deeds and touching sacrifices of those who depend on princes' favor or are devoted to the knightly service of royal masters.

But men are always interesting, especially men of great powers, who figure conspicuously in the service of the state, whether under a personal sovereign or the sovereign people. We have had men in our history whose lives are calculated to interest even the general reader, though not with that romantic fascination that belongs to history in ruder days and countries less free. No man can achieve eminence and fail to be interesting to his fellow men, if the incidents of his life are set forth in a forcible and effective manner. There is nothing humanity more admires, even in a free country, than men of exceptional power, of uncommon force, of brilliant achievement. And such men certainly have no less scope under free institutions than elsewhere, no less opportunity to gain distinction by the exercise of their powers in the service of the state. It is a mistake to suppose the sovereign mass must needs overpower and submerge the individual man. Too many of our public men appear to think that, in order to be accepted as leaders and to become exalted in political life, they must take pains to place themselves in front of the people, whichever way they are disposed to face, and be pushed along or raised aloft by the force of popular favor as the result of subserviency. In point of fact, the mere demagogue does not command admiration long or acquire much real power over an intelligent people. Strong character, independence, energy, fidelity to conviction, and power to enforce it, are more admired and exert a far greater influence. Many a promising statesman has wrecked his hopes by studying to win the favor of the people, while those who gain a real ascendancy over the popular mind do so by the display of strong, unbending characteristics, a force and firmness that lead men to rely upon them and to appeal to them to take the direction of affairs from weak and vacillating hands.

If our history is, on the whole, uninteresting to the general reader, it is of absorbing interest to the student. The latter finds attractiveness in the growth of institutions, and that is what the history of the United States is. For the last hundred years it has been almost entirely a constitutional history. This may seem the more strange, as for nearly the whole of that period we are presumed to have lived and to have been governed under the fixed framework of a written Constitution, unchangeable save through

certain difficult formalities, and in fact almost unchanged. Nevertheless, our whole history has been one of constitutional development and growth, and therein consists its interest to the student and the thinker. It has been the fashion to appeal to the written Constitution, as though it were a definite and explicit embodiment of all political wisdom, and yet the political contentions of three generations have been waged upon its meaning and purport. All parties, while professing the utmost reverence for its spirit and its letter, have been disputing and fighting as to what powers it grants and to whom, and what can or can not be done by its authority. Opinions have been as far asunder as the poles, and this contention has constituted our political history for ninety years; out of it our actual institutions have been wrought. Possibly the worship of the Constitution for its perfections has bordered upon superstition. There is a bare chance that it is not such a wonderfully complete and flawless piece of work. When we remember how the Convention which framed it was almost hopelessly divided; what concession was made here on one side and what compromise was granted there on the other side; with what enormous difficulty the various able minds engaged in the work could be brought to any agreement; how the instrument was at last accepted, not as free from defects, but as the best that could be done at the time and under the existing circumstances; with what reluctance the various States received it, how they condemned, denounced, derided it, and finally accepted it, out of dread of the chaos and confusion almost hopeless that would follow if it were rejected—when we recall all these undoubted historic facts, it may not be treasonable or even unpatriotic if a reluctant doubt forces itself into the mind as to the perfections of the Federal Constitution of these States.

In fact, it was very defective, in so far as it left much in doubt, and in some important respects was inconsistent with itself, or at least so inexplicit as to make irreconcilable interpretations plausible and defensible. When did the dispute as to the power of the nation and the rights of the States begin? From the very start, and the arguments have scarcely varied from the time when Hamilton and Jefferson represented the opposing tendencies to this day. The right of nullification and of secession, under certain circumstances, was maintained by the Father of Democracy himself. The very letter of the Constitution has permitted the contentions of ninety years, as to the scope of national and of State authority, and allowed the discussion all the wide latitude over which it has ranged. And

who has advocated national authority, and who the rights of States? Aside from certain conspicuous statesmen, whose views have been determined by the constitution of their own minds, it has depended altogether on the interests to be subserved and the party to be benefited by one interpretation or the other. The Republicans of Jefferson's day came into existence to protest against the centralization of power in the national Government. Before they got control, the national authority, in their opinion, could do nothing, not even acquire territory; but that did not prevent the Louisiana purchase by Jefferson himself, nor the usurpations of the Democracy at the Federal capital in Jackson's time, nor that vast stretch of national power, the annexation of Texas by Congressional resolution. Democratic doctrine as to Federal authority depended on whether the authority was to be exercised by Democrats; and their opponents have always acted on similar principles. Those who sway the national authority, and can use it for their own ends, always believe in it. When their opponents get control, these same men are for restriction. In the war of 1812 it was Massachusetts and Rhode Island that claimed to decide whether the Federal Government could call out their militia, and threatened secession on account of violation of what they claimed to be their rights. If the South became specially given to State-rights doctrines at a later period, it was only because they feared assault upon their special interests through the national authority, and could only shield them behind the rights of States. Which doctrine should prevail has depended on the preponderance of interests affecting the control of affairs at Washington. State rights are freely allowed where they do not come in conflict with the wider interests of the nation; where they do, they are curtailed just so far as the preponderating interest that gets control is against them. The representative Government at the national capital, and not the Constitution, decides in every case. It always has decided, and it always will. Outside the mere framework of the government constructed by the Convention of 1787, our real Constitution has become more and more a matter of legislation and of precedent, springing out of the vague chaos of implied and latent powers. But more and more it has appeared a necessity of national life, regardless of disputed doctrines of constitutional interpretation, that national authority should predominate, and the whole should not only contain but control the parts, just so far as the interests of the whole are involved.

And why, indeed, should not our history be a constitutional his-

tory, our Constitution a matter of growth and development? To a remarkable extent the Anglo-Saxon has prevailed in our national councils, notwithstanding the heterogeneous mixture of nationalities in the people. This mode of building a constitution is essentially English, and the tendency of English genius has been too strong for the rigid limitations of a written document. The instrument of 1787 was imperfect, but it served the purpose of founding a government. It was wonderfully elastic, but it could not fit itself to all the unforeseen exigencies of a nation destined to an amazing growth. It was morally impossible that it should be continually adapted by amendment. In point of fact, in ordinary times any amendment is practically out of the question; but the growth of the nation is not stopped, and the Government refuses to be paralyzed in unyielding swathing-bands. In effect, we have and have long had a parliamentary government, and it will become more and more evident as time goes on. In this fact lies our safety rather than any danger to free institutions. Congress and the President rule the country almost as absolutely as though there were no question of fixed constitutional powers and limitations. Hence our history is eminently constitutional, and our institutions can only be understood from its careful study.

The position here taken is somewhat novel, perhaps heretical, but if space would permit it could be sustained by ample illustrations drawn from our legislation and administrative action. The present purpose, however, has merely been to introduce the subject of American history and biography, and point out some of the defects in the way in which they are generally presented, in consequence of the lack of a clear recognition of some true guiding principle. Our narrative history for the most part lacks that vividness and life which might be imparted to it by a spirited portrayal of the character and deeds of conspicuous men. There has been little impartial analysis and scientific dissection of the actors in our national drama, scarcely more of artistic painting of the various figures in their proper places and true relations, with clear outlines and vivid colors. Books specially devoted to biography are generally one-sided eulogiums or mere accumulations of half-digested material. Constitutional history has been vitiated with the assumption that the Constitution was itself a perfect and explicit embodiment of all fundamental law, and had a controlling force in all public action, whereas it has in fact only been made the cover for whatever the majority wished to do.

Von Holst, as a foreigner and a German, is the first to give us an outside view, which is strictly that of a scholar, and his work* is in many respects the most valuable contribution thus far made to the constitutional and political history of the United States. He is free from an undue reverence for the work of the fathers, and he discusses the character, motives, and aims of our statesmen with a bold and easy hand. He is unsparing in analysis, and displays no other bias than that of a believer in a strong government. He evidently has little faith in the diffusion of sovereignty, or in the practicability of administering the affairs of a nation without the concentration of authority in the hands of those who represent national interests. His comprehension of the place and function, in our complex system, of the separate States, is perhaps not altogether clear. Indeed, he hardly recognizes any chance for coördination between States which are parts and the nation which is the whole. The relation, in his mind, must be one of subordination of the local and the fragmentary to the general and complete. Hence, while he recognizes the defects of the Constitution and the justification it has given to the doctrine of rights and powers in States which are not circumscribed by those of the Union, he sustains the wisdom of that interpretation, or that disregard of the letter, which tends to submerge the States and consolidate and strengthen the nation.

Alexander Hamilton he seems to regard as the great statesman of the formative period of our institutions. He evidently shares that admiration of his powers and his political sagacity which is excited in most conservative minds by the study of this period of our history. Jefferson's character provokes his distrust and dislike. The Adamses he treats as statesmen of a high order. Madison does not receive his undivided approbation, for he regards him as not altogether consistent nor always guided by settled principles. Jackson he looks upon with a sort of abhorrence, as of a self-sufficient autocrat, playing fast and loose with principles of which he has no clear conception. For some of the later men, politicians rather than statesmen, who figured conspicuously in the long controversy preceding the annexation of Texas, he has an unconcealed contempt. His purpose has evidently been to sketch the growth and development of constitutional principles as exemplified in the Government of this country, whether fixed originally in the written instrument

* The Constitutional and Political History of the United States. By H. von Holst. Chicago: Callaghan & Co.

whose authority has been held so sacred, or brought into operation by successive administrations. In performing this task, he has given us his most effective, if not his most instructive work in criticising the public men whose conduct has given shape and direction to parliamentary action. "State Sovereignty and Slavery" was the special subject of his first volume, which was published some time ago, and covered the period from the foundation of the Government to Jackson's Administration; but the same topic is the leading theme of the new volume, which continues the discussion to the annexation of Texas. In fact, it underlies all the contests of our political history from the adoption of the Constitution almost to the present hour.

Hamilton and Jefferson represent the two opposing ideas which prevailed at the time our Government was formed, and which with some variation have been at the basis of our political division into parties ever since, and have been involved in all the contests and controversies of our constitutional career. Hamilton embodied the tendency to a centralization and strengthening of power in the national Government. There is no doubt that he would personally have preferred a monarchy. Having got all he could in the Constitution, he at once took the lead in the interpretation of that instrument which put as much as possible into it of national authority. Jefferson, on the other hand, represented the demand for a complete diffusion of sovereignty among the people, its exercise so far as practicable locally and in States, and the confining of national functions as closely as possible under the most restrictive interpretation of the Constitution.

Albert Gallatin can hardly be called one of the great statesmen of the early period of our constitutional history, in which his active public life was spent. As a financier only was he the peer of Hamilton. As a diplomatist he held a high rank, but he never attained a commanding position as a master in political philosophy or a leader of men. He was a follower of Jefferson, *hard passibus æquis*, and accepted his ideas of government with scarcely any assertion of originality on his own part. Still, he was intimately associated with the political movements of his time, and took by no means a reticent part. His biography ought to be the source of some new light. As prepared by Mr. Adams,* from the papers and records

* The Life of Albert Gallatin. By Henry Adams. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co.

preserved by his family, and from the public archives, it is too voluminous, and has too much of the character of a digest of material, to be attractive to the general reader. But it is a valuable repository of information for the real student of history. The three bulky volumes of "Writings,"* made up chiefly of letters, hardly serve any other useful purpose than to bring together a mass of material that ought not to be lost in a convenient shape for preservation.

Judge Shea's book on "The Life and Epoch of Hamilton" † is not a biography. So far as it narrates the events of the great statesman's life, it is confined to his very youthful years, of which least has been heretofore known. Though descending somewhat to insignificant details, in so far as it is new it can not be set down as unimportant or uninteresting. The most attractive portion, however, is to be found in the preliminary discussion of the man's character and the part he played in establishing the national Government. The fault to be found with it is a lack of close analysis, and a tone of indiscriminating panegyric that pervades it, fitted rather for a funeral oration than a sober contribution to historical discussion. A too enthusiastic admirer is not the most instructive biographer. He gives one side somewhat too vividly to present a rigidly truthful picture.

The war of 1812 is an episode in our history in which we can take little pride, but which may be studied with profit. General Cullum's review of its military campaigns and sketches of the engineers employed in its field operations, ‡ have properly nothing to do with its political causes or the constitutional questions involved in its conduct. His criticisms are chiefly those of a military expert, and they display the freedom that belongs to that character. The chief value of the work—and it is not a slight one—consists in the faithful collection and lucid presentation of materials not easily accessible, and in danger of being lost altogether.

A. K. FISKE.

* The Writings of Albert Gallatin. Edited by Henry Adams. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co. 3 vols. 8vo.

† The Life and Epoch of Alexander Hamilton. A Historical Study. By the Honorable George Shea. Boston: Houghton, Osgood & Co.

‡ Campaigns of the War of 1812-'15, with Brief Biographies of the American Engineers. By Brevet Major-General George W. Cullum. New York: James Miller.